THE MOUNTAINS HAVE COME CLOSER

Jim Wayne Miller



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JIM WAYNE MILLER

The Mountains Have Come Closer

Appalachian Consortium Press
Boone, North Carolina
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The Appalachian Consortium was a non-profit educational organization composed of institutions and agencies located in Southern Appalachia. From 1973 to 2004, its members published pioneering works in Appalachian studies documenting the history and cultural heritage of the region. The Appalachian Consortium Press was the first publisher devoted solely to the region and many of the works it published remain seminal in the field to this day.

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For Jim Brown and Tom Brown,
and the invisible crowd on the sidewalk.

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PART ONE:
IN THE AMERICAN FUNHOUSE

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SATURDAY MORNING

Seven hundred miles inland I wake to waves
crashing beneath the bedroom window. I look
out. Sure enough, the house is plowing
gently—at three knots, maybe—through
a moderate green sea of grass and wild onions.

Nothing else has changed. It's Saturday morning.
Books, bats, balls, dolls and teddy bears
with idiot smiles—the contents of every bedroom
spilled like puzzle pieces over floors.

And every room offers a non-stop show.
Here theme music darts along with the lives
of talking animals. Bells ring, whistles
blow, glass breaks, timbers shatter.

Down the hall the ears of other walls
tingle with teen-age promises of love.
Windows are misted over with so much yearning.
The palm of a catcher's mitt
has broken into a sweat.

In the living room—leftovers of a party
from three years ago. The glasses have grown
elegant fur linings. When I enter, the dip dish
scurries backward like a spider.

The vacuum cleaner whines by me in the hall.
I pause midway between two entertainments
where teenagers pledge undying love
to talking animals.

I open a door and step into the hum and drone
of a thirty-minute wash-cycle.

This is the engine room.
Engine room, engine room, the washer says.

I become a cat trying to back down a tree.
My arms retract into my body until
only the hands stick out, making
feeble burrowing motions.

In the garage I turn myself
into a hammer. I drive two nails into
the wall and hang a while between them.

I become a twenty dollar bill
and hide inside my wallet.
Disguised as an old overcoat, I climb
the folding ladder to the attic, pull
it up after me and sit among suitcases.
Engine room, engine room, the shuddering
attic floor says. But this is the baggage room.

The house plows on through waves of grass, traveling
somewhere. Suddenly I know
I am a suitcase someone else
will live a life out of when we arrive.

GETTING TOGETHER

Suddenly old friends are in the house. Laughter.
Separated years back, we've wandered around
lost in the American Funhouse. Together again,
what a crowd we are! The walls are angled
mirrors multiplying us many times over.
Each one of us sees the friend he knew
standing back of the one this friend has become,
and shyly, like an unacknowledged companion,
confused by all this familiarity, unseen by our friends,
stands the person we know we are. Laughter.

Moving through the crowd, I realize
I've gradually got used to walking around
in my life a huge elongated trunk and rippled face,
a bulging wrap-around brow, moving on stumpy legs,
my belt just above my shoetops, my chin
riding level with my fly. I have forgotten parts
of myself, my ears lie curled like lettuce leaves,
my hands grow right out of my shoulders,
no wrists or arms or elbows in between.

Glancing past familiar strangers, I try
to hold out a hand to someone who holds out a hand.
Laughter! We hold back all but the little horrors.

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY IS TODAY

you are a year older
and well into a cycle which began
with the alignment of Venus and Mars
in your seventh house
which is mortgaged
to the Daylight Savings & Loan Assoc.

Expect your days to accumulate
like old newspapers full of bad news,
to come back canceled checks,
to lie swollen like the pages of a book
left out in the rain.

Stay away from friends, partners; avoid
telephones, since their ringing starts
dozens of memoranda fluttering
in your stomach, like birds
roused out of sleep.

This is no time for a change, keep
wearing those same dirty socks.
If opportunity knocks, say
you gave at the office.

A PLAGUE OF TELEPHONES

They infest my life.
Attaching themselves to walls, they sit
like locusts clutching treebark
in a seventeenth summer.
Silence is the scratching
of their feet on scattered papers.
They crawl on me, creep into my ears
and cling there, bulging with bad news, singing
Pharaoh, Pharaoh!

CERTAIN DREAMS

I don't mean the kind of dream that sings all day
from some dark place in the mind, like a cricket in the house,
or those shy ones, creatures fond of damp places,
shunning light, silverfish that scurry away as you wake,
or those you come on like errant spiders between books,
or even those that crouch, a mouse in a drawer.

I'm talking about certain dreams that make you wonder,
How did they get there? For coming on them is as if,
whistling and fumbling with my keys, briefcase in hand,
I'd opened the door onto the solid rump of a horse
quartered in my fourth-floor office, and startled,
the horse turned in that small place, hooves clopping,
then stood reading titles on a bookshelf.

—That sort of dream. A dream you don't doubt, still
you wonder, How did it get there? It is as if
you were troutfishing back on Little Snowbird
on a fine June morning, knee-deep at the lower end
of a pool, and looked up and there—with a hide like elm bark—
lay an alligator sunning on a rock. That sort of dream.

Sorcerers, they've turned
the house into a serialized fairy tale.
The plot, full of reversals,
mysterious messages, unfolds
day after day, surprising
as fried marbles underfoot.

A frog on the floor, waiting to be kissed.
A rabbit, a pet snake.
Half a sandwich shelved with books.
Ghosts, guns, flowers.
Winged, web-footed snakes drawn
on the walls of bedrooms, their caves.

There is an enchanted forest inhabited
by crayola people who fear
the heat of the sun and never venture
from under their crayola trees—so different

from the watercolor folk, who live
in an eternal spring, standing forever
in watercolor puddles, hands reaching up
to a sun that looks down on them,
a blissful idiot.

In my desk drawer, an unfamiliar
piece of paper that accordions out:
"Don't touch this or you'll die!"

It's too late.

I SHARE

with children and foxhounds
a way of sizing up how a situation smells.
Like a child who hangs back
in the corridors of all public buildings
because his skin remembers the doctor's office,
I am wary of commencements, ritual initiations,
the keynote address at three-day conferences,
programs where any honor is conferred.

A way of thinking with the ear only
makes coughing echoing in a vaulted hall
bloom like sprays of funeral flowers.

Faces under platform lights bear
a tint of the undertaker's art.
Voices amplified through microphones
come to me soaked in ether.
During invocations, opening remarks,
the speaker's peroration, I am one of those
who looks out over the crowd aware only
of how we are all frozen like diced fruit
suspended in gelatin, quivering a little.

After a wedding I am apt
to step out of the church and head for the gravesite.
At commencements I have a compulsion
to express sympathy to the bereaved family.

I have a fear of wandering out
some evening in the rain, after
the benediction, my umbrella under my arm,
my overcoat buttoned to my jacket,—

of standing in a drizzly parking lot
under blue mercury lights
watching the lanterns of night fishermen
bob in waterbeads standing on a car.

I'm afraid I may be found sitting in someone's car
trying to start it with my office key,
but quite lucid about the girl
who sat beside me at eighth-grade graduation,
and remembering well enough a horsehair hanging
on a barbed-wire fence in a mountain pasture.

FISH STORY

By February we were growing restless.
Evenings we sorted through our tackle boxes,
making everything neat, untangling snarls
of leaders, hooks, and swivels, sharpening knives.

Our boat sat on its trailer in the garage.
We polished brass, put in a cockpit light,
tightened cleats, coiled anchor lines,
ran the motor in a barrel until it purred.

But the lake held low and muddy, full of stumps
and rocky ridgetops jutting from the chop
like the backs of dinosaurs. A week of rain
brought the creeks down muddy. Cold wind drove

the water, slopping it against red-clay
banks, stirring it to a soupy froth
of rising falling rocking driftwood rafts.
On a Saturday in March when roadsigns droned in wind

we took a whole trunkful of kites and fishing rods
and drove to the big field beside the school. I snapped
a flopping shark-faced kite onto a spinning
rod and let it run, shaking its head,

up into the currents of high blue sky.
Fred flew a red-eyed dragon, Jimmy a bat.
We braced the butts of our rods against our stomachs,
we pumped, we reeled. I tried the stiff salt-water

rod and reel and burned my thumb as the shark
raced off with all my monofilament.
We gave the kites their heads, then fought them down,
adjusting drags, comforting burnt thumbs

with a kiss. The kites took off toward distant trees,
made long, bull-necked runs at far-away
power lines, darted, twisted, rolled,
swooped while we ran backwards reeling up slack line.

More than once they tangled our lines high
overhead. A low-test line I used for trout
in Trammel Creek popped like a pistol shot,
then fell toward me as the shark lunged free.

We waved to him and wished him luck.—That night
blue sky kept running underneath my eyelids,
and the shark-faced kite with jagged teeth
was climbing still, trailing a length of line.

I waved again.

A HOUSE OF READERS

At 9:42 on this May morning
the children's rooms are concentrating too.
Like a tendril growing toward the sun, Ruth
moves her book into a wedge of light
that settles on the floor like a butterfly.
She turns a page.
Fred is immersed in magic, cool
as a Black Angus belly-deep in a farm pond.

The only sounds: pages turning softly.
This is the quietness
of bottomland where you can hear only the young corn
growing, where a little breeze stirs the blades
and then breathes in again.

I mark my place.
I listen like a farmer in the rows.

SKYDIVERS

When I think of us seated in our separate days,
a hand under my breastbone tightens around a bar,
my seat tips back, rises, and my feet swing free,
as if I were riding a chair-lift in an amusement park.

We are strung out in five seats at fixed
distances from one another, dangling our feet
over treetops, over the heads of funny people
telescoped into themselves, whether thin or fat,

rising past several musics, past zebras and llamas
in their lots. Looking back at one another, we wave and clown.
One by one you turn ahead of me and, still climbing,
I touch my hand to yours as you pass, moving down.

When we are quiet in our separate rooms at night,
I think we are all skydivers falling through our
separate spaces. We float, lie prone in a circle.
Reaching out, we hold hands for a moment, then we're

off on our own currents, tumbling, backpedaling,
swimming or taking the sun in a playground
high over a brown yellow and green checkerboard
where roads run like lines in the palm of my hand.

It is pleasant and so still but we are falling
farther and farther apart through private corridors
of air. The earth grows under us, and begins
to be patches of ground the size of our shadows.

GOING SOUTH

Sorry to inconvenience so many people,
and feeling it a breach of decorum
to have so private a thing happen in public,

I think I will probably die
in a long line of traffic
on an evening in November
when mercury vapor lights are coming on.

A red light will jam in my brain
and I'll sit there slumped over the wheel
blocking a main artery
while angry cars begin to honk behind me.

A traffic division helicopter
will dispatch a cruiser
and report on a radio station's
afternoon Traveling Home show
one stalled car, one lane of traffic backed up.

The cruiser, the ambulance, the Live Action tv unit,
the whirling lights, the curious looking into the camera—
all will flicker on the screen at 10:07.
The face of the eyewitness who discovered the truth
will fade into a commercial at 10:09.
Newsprint will disappear like sooty snow.
Traffic will flow smoothly once again.

Journalists with their noses into news
will miss the only story worth the telling.
So here it is, like footage recovered
from a correspondent who went careering
into death, camera clicking to the point
of impact: high over the town,
above tiers of power lines, a black river
of birds turned slowly and flowed south.

PART TWO:
YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

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BRIER RIDDLE

For a long time he lived
like a frog in my pocket.
In a black forest
a lost girl came and kissed
him into a handsome prince.

Since then he has been living
off a generous patrimony,
a one-eyed king
in a country of blind fingers.

NO NAME

He stopped being able to say "I."
As if a stroke
had frozen his face and given him some
impediment of speech, he lost
the gift of idle talk, grew
impatient with words that rose
like bubbles from the mouths
of pretty goldfish in a glass aquarium.

Like a school of minnows that must swim
against a current or else panic, crowd,
suffocate and die, his thoughts sought out
a deep invisible flow and, moving
against it, lived among dangerous
slow-moving shapes that had no name.

TURN YOUR RADIO ON

I

He couldn't hear his own thoughts in the city that never slept.
Like a voice on a far-off radio station, his thoughts rose
and fell in a storm of static. The city's rush and roar
even poured through his dreams, boiling up like a waterfall.

Asleep or waking, he tried to keep a sense of direction south.
Lying awake in the smoky carbon darkness of northern nights,
facing east, he kept a knowledge, like a book under his pillow,
that the mountains lay to his right, beyond the mills and warehouses.

But sometimes he'd come awake in darkness and find the room
had turned in the slow current of his sleep. He would not rest
again until he'd righted the room, and sleep was drifting
away from the waterfall's roar toward the quietness of mountains.

But he never drifted home before he woke. He felt so stilled
inside, a breathing silence. It was as if his thoughts had been
a friend, a buddy who went everywhere with him. Now he
turned and found that old companion hadn't followed him here.

II

Sometimes he'd sit for hours looking through a shoebox
of family photographs: his grandfather leading a pair of Walker
foxhounds; the old man atop a boulder in the Bearwallow
holding his squirrel gun like a walking stick, or on the porch

with his grandmother, both of them sitting in split-bottom chairs.
Weathered and home-made like the chairs they sat in, and like the house

and barn, so comfortably in place, they looked like one another.
Something about the way they sat spoke to him through his own thoughts

all the way from the mountains, like a powerful transmitter: this place
belongs to us, their faces said, and we belong to it.
When it's time, we come out on this porch and take our ease,
and talk, as naturally as treefrogs in the poplars sing toward dark.

CHOPPING WOOD

Idling traffic, fumes
at a busy intersection of nerves.
Dances on the deck
of coffee-laden freighters plying arteries.
Smoke-filled meetings floating
through veins, tables turning.
The sting of nicotine
laid like a lash on a horse's rump.
That screech and snort,
that babble and grunt
disappears around a bend in the blood.

Merciful, hard labor numbs the nerves as it
advances, snuffs out every light
in a steady rain of darkness. Pain goes to sleep
as night falls over any small farm of flesh.

And the resurrection and miracle of rest
after labor: arms awakening, a hundred
tingling lights lit along creeks and ridges;
a rooster crowing in flesh becoming light
with birdsong from the meshed branches of nerves
casting shadows like trees along the river.

HIS HANDS

He noticed his hands, how they
cracked each other's knuckles, how his fingers
thrummed restlessly on every table top,
foraging for magazines, snuffling about
in his pockets for cigarettes, like a dog
tracking a mole. He noticed his hands
reassuring one another, noticed them
turning on television sets when he wasn't looking,
like horses who learn to open
gates and barn doors with their noses.

He knew his hands had learned from him
how to seem independent, how to hide
from the larger creature they were just a part of.
His hands were only children
telling on the street what they'd heard at home.

He walked in the woods.
Fish hung in his veins, shadows fanning.
Birds circled his farthest green thoughts.

He came home after dark, the moon following
like a friendly old dog. At home he noticed
his hands, alert, looking up, trying
to start a game of fetch.

WINTER DAYS

He loved warm winter days when woodlands opened
their summer secrets to a passerby.
Treeshadows lay crisscrossed, low creeks deepened,
borrowing their cold blue from the sky.

Icicles glistened on the rock-backed ridges,
a field of broomsage hissed in the wind.
Frost and fencepost shadows melted by edges
of pasture-fields where coal-black cattle stood.

Sunlight ricocheted from tin-topped barns,
streaking the chalk walls of the limestone quarry.
Between white sycamores the river turned,
sure of where it was going, in no hurry.

BRIER VISIONS

I

When he thought hard, his mind became a plowpoint
digging in, turning a furrow in his brow.
Sometimes he struck a snag, a rock or root;
the bright point rode up into the light,
then dove deep again to his gee and haw.

II

All the woods and weathers he'd ever known,
his mind, when he took hope, turned sunlight
slanting down through leafless trees
in mid-March when redbuds blooming broke
a jam of crisscrossed shadows in the coves.

III

Black as a crow his mind would fly across
stripmined land where muddy water heaving
rose and fell, red froth and foam,
bubbles of blood in the mouth of a gutshot deer.

IV

Like floodwaters rising in the night,
radio waves moved up the mountain valleys.
Coves and hollers rocked with the city's flotsam:
Wrigley's and Lucky Strike, Ford and Goodyear.
Lifted off the land by a rising music,
trees cut loose by singing saws, the people
rode the receding suck of sung commercials,
floated like rafted logs toward the mainstream.

GOING TO SLEEP BY A TROUTSTREAM

From where he lay the steady crash of water
down over rocks
a hundred yards upstream
was no more than the far-off waterfall
a sudden wind set roaring in the treetops.

Like icy water running from a bold spring
that wind came pouring off a thunderstorm
back on the headwaters.
He lay like a trout
hugging the bottom of its flowing.

Over his head, toward the surface of that windstream,
willow leaves, silver in the flow,
became schooled minnows going against the current.
He saw them swimming, swimming in one place;

then, letting go, he drifted
backwards in the flow
and came to rest
where the light of stars grew down
like bonewhite roots
under a bank of wet leaves, rotten wood,
darkness.

Those sudden weathers, those awkward
encounters! He kept meeting feelings like
old schoolmates, faces whose names he'd
forgot. He came on feelings he could
enter again only as a stranger might
a house he'd once lived in; feelings like
places changed almost beyond recognition: a
once-green pasture field grown up in
pines too thick ever to enter again. Oh,
some of them he picked up as easily as gripping
this ax by its smooth helve, or the handles
of that plow leaning unused a long time
in the toolshed. But what about those
feelings he came on like graves of
childhood pets—a dog, a brindled cat, a bird—
their little bones in hidden graves
marked only in memory? He had to admit it: he
didn't live here any longer. He was
settled in a suburb, north of himself.

RESTORING AN OLD FARMHOUSE

He kept coming here.

On the low-skied landscape rolling behind his eyes
country feelings, settled and gray
as weathered farmhouses left leaning in Kentucky fields
among broomsage and cedars.

He kept coming here
a deer drawn again and again to a saltlick.

Pulling away a warped, split board, he found beneath
it another just as old but seasoned and straight,
sawmill fresh. He drew a rusty-headed nail,
found its shank bright as the day it was driven.

Dismantling country feelings.

Tearing down, building up again
from what was salvaged.

In that farmhouse, under that low sky in November,
he read his past like a salt-caked sheet of newsprint
used once to paper a smokehouse shelf.

A coming shape, a new room and view,
rose from old flooring.

Two times mingled. Fresh sawdust
spumed yellow as sunlight from old timber.

LIGHT LEAVING

His mother was sixteen when he was born.
They grew up together.
Now he was older than she was.
But one thing never changed:
night always fell, drifting over fields,
settling softly on the tops of trees,
like his mother's black hair falling over her neck
and down her back when she loosened her combs in the evening.

HE REMEMBERS HIS MOTHER

He thought of her and a churchbell's wider and wider ringing
spread over the still pool of a Sunday morning.

His rusty recollections of her were like
a handful of fishhooks and knotted droplines:
scent of honeysuckle and hymnals, blue sky
full of bees and belling, cackle, buzz and bawl.
The flash of a hummingbird over marigolds
growing inside a whitewashed tractor tire.

His mother in her black dress on Sunday morning
became a crow's call in his ear, her hand
a crow's foot clutching a black Bible.

Sweat, soap and vanilla on a Sunday morning,
the air on his hot cheeks standing cool
as the touch of polished marble gravestones.
Resurrection. Wasp wings. Fall, flight.

Under the leafy tangle of his senses
death and religion always gliding, gliding,
snakes in a dark green swale of creeping kudzu.

Ridgetops and hollows rose and fell around them.
High overhead the churchhouse creaked,
an old ship's rigging. They sailed in a storm
of hymns, slammed to the trough, rolled to the crest
of sermons, the cemetery trailing always
in their wake, acres of heaving ringing buoys.

BIRD IN THE HOUSE

In a dogwood winter of grief he always
turned from fresh graves into another country.
Subtraction of lives from the land
altered fields, changed weather, shortened
seasons, made him—no longer a face reflected
in the cool springs of their eyes—
a sudden stranger to himself.

He turned always knowing their lives had bounded
the country he had known—the rounds and routines
of their days, little seasons, familiar weathers,
certain as rosebuds, fall apples or first frost,
their rooted lives great trees, his summer shade,
their stories on the porch at night: rain on the roof.

Like lines in the palms of their hands, paths
they made from house to barn to field got lost
in weeds and never came home. Fields and buildings
turned their backs on one another. A hill
eroded down to white limestone: flesh fallen from bones.

He always turned away with a heart fluttering
like a sparrow beating its wings at a window inside
the emptied house. Beyond a baffling hard
transparency: cedars, fenced fields, light, air,
country he came from.

HIS THREE-LEGGED DREAM

He saw it coming, lumbering, big and black,
the light of fire reflected on fast water flashing
in its eyes. Its bones shone cold
and white right through the flesh.

He felt the warm brush of its low-slung
belly pass over him so close he smelled
mineshafts and rotting toadstools.

Its thrashing brought him wide awake.

Moving toward the backside of his mind,
drawing near, as he would a place where he
had set a trap, he found, fast
in the steel blue jaws of his remembering,
only a foot—jagged bone, tendons
twisted at the stump of a black paw
clenched like a baby's hand.

And still—on moonlit branchbanks, sandbars
of sleep—he can find its tracks.
Sometimes he can even catch a glimpse
of his ranging, three-legged dream
before its bones
glowing in its dark shape, pale in his waking,
turn starshine at dawn on black stumpwater.

SET APART

Always now he carried a pearl-handled grudge,
snub-nosed, heavy, holstered close to his heart.

Where once he held his tongue, he carried a blade,
good steel that held only its cold keen edge.

He drove his mind so hard it sang like whining
wheels rolling high over gaps and gorges

on trestles of determination. Rounding turns,
he came on his black thoughts, hunched over entrails

like buzzards eating carrion on the road.
The thing or two he knew he carried folded

like the certain knowledge of hundred dollar bills
whispering in a side flap of his wallet.

And drove toward mountains, and a self he would become:
old man in faded denim, gray as a weathered barn,

fencepost at a field's edge—until he moved.

ON THE WINGS OF A DOVE

Once, after he'd come back from Ohio,
he worked at road construction for a summer
back up on the Laurel and Ivy Rivers
in Madison. After work, instead of going
all the way to Asheville, he'd stop by
a bootlegger's in Marshall, buy some white,
and drive to a place down on the French Broad River
below Redmon Dam. Pulling his car
down a sandy road, nosing it back
into the willows and sycamores so far
they closed around it, he'd sit there after sundown,
the smell of tar and sweat and asphalt in his clothes,
smoking and drinking white, listening to bluegrass
on the radio, watching the river, mountains and sky
run together in the coming dark.

Catfishermen built fires along the bank,
and over on the island, and hung their lanterns
out over the water. His troubles sat
right under his breastbone, black
as a treeful of starlings, all talking at once.
But when Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys
played Wait a Little Longer, Jesus, or Blue Moon
of Kentucky, and his mind throbbed and hummed
like pistons under the hood of a good truck
hauling his thoughts over a long open highway,
and the lights on the riverbank got in tune,
his mind turned into a whining sawblade
spinning so fast it grew invisible and quiet.

The starlings under his breastbone stopped talking.

Then white doves rose out of his ribcage
and flew out over the river toward the island.

EVERY LEAF A MIRROR

Once when he tended corn in mountain fields
and raised tobacco in branchbank bottom patches,
he'd break a little garden ground in spring,
leave the tending to his wife and younguns,
and in the slack time strike out with a little
budget of clothes, and work a spell in timber—
stay gone till it pleased him to come home again.

But now the sun turned clockwise in the sky,
and radio shows sang out of junked cars
rolled over on their sides along the creek.
Even in the woods, and in the fibers
of the shirt on his back he heard time ticking.
Every leaf was a mirror he looked in
reflecting his face among smokestacks, billboards,
shopping centers, mills and vacation cottages
hanging like a mirage along the ridgetops.

Time swept past roaring like a tractor-trailer,
leaving him hatless in a wake of fumes.

BORN AGAIN

Sometimes his whorled ear became a seashell
and he heard only correspondences: wind streaming
through the tops of trees was a far-off waterfall,
the tooting of a hunter's horn came to him
the remembered baying of coonhounds barking treed,
the sounds standing as solid as barns on a ridge
in the clear air of afterstorm.

Sometimes a past time sank, silent, into
the ground of his remembering. Searching, he could find
no more than traces, scattered signs, as if
no more remained of that lived time
than a rotten foundation beam, a rusty hinge
dug out of the ground, a bent nail, a plowpoint.

His memory clouded like a muddy spring,
and he'd go shadowless under wet skies.
When his weather cleared, he'd see some long lost day
as plainly as if it were a shiny quarter
lying on the bottom of a pool,
bright as a tin-topped barn
in Sunday morning sunlight.

His memory lived, died, and lived again,
each re-birth restoring him to himself, saying:
you must be born again
and again
and again.

THE BRIER BREATHING

In the evening
when he walked
down
the steep slope
of his breath
into the hollow of sleep
he distinguished all
his different breathings—

breathing that fluttered
like swallows in a chimney

breathing that sang
easy rhythmical
a crosscut saw in timber

breathing short
shallow
strokes
chopping corn
hoeblade
clacking in rocks

breathing that never bottomed out
but kept on giving, going
down like plowed newground
still sinking underfoot
as he passed on
and came down soft again

breathing so deep
it went all
the way home
to a quiet cove
where pee wees called

breathing that turned his body
leafy
turned it cold
and came up
out of a maze of passageways
a groundhog from its den

breathing from so far back
it trickled
transparent over rocks
and stood in sunlit pools
where ripples spread

wider and wider
where shadows of leaves grew gills
that slowly rose and fell.

LONG VIEW

Shooting over the highway at
seventy miles an hour, he met
fenceposts and telephone poles swishing
past in blurred panic, receding
in the rearview mirror, gone
like falling screams.

His heart, unhurried,
paced itself by those Kentucky knobs
that kept the river and wide bottomland between them
and never fell behind but followed
like a herd of graceful beasts
still undiscovered and unnamed
they lived so deep inside the continent.

PART THREE:
BRIER SERMON

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HARVEST

Now his whole life seemed weathered and old-fashioned.
When others spoke, their words made pictures
with gleaming surfaces and metal trim.
He spoke drafty pole barns and garden plots.
His customs had a mustiness, a smokehouse mold
about them; his shriveled wisdom hung like peppers
and shuckybeans from a cabin rafter.
Beliefs leaned back like doors with broken hinges,
stood sunken like a rotten springhouse roof.

Still, he thought of songs landlocked two hundred
years, living in coves and hollers, far from
home, by creeks and waterfalls, and springdrain
trickles,—songs that still remembered the salt salt sea
and held all past time green in the month of May
and made all love and death and sorrow sweet.

So he wasn't sad to see his life gathered
up in books, kept on a shelf like dry seeds
in an envelope, or carried far off
like spanish needles in a fox's fur.
His people brought the salt sea in their songs;
now they moved mountains to the cities
and made all love and death and sorrow sweet there.

Heaviness was always left behind
to perish, to topple like a stone chimney.

But what was lightest lasted, lived in song.

THE BRIER LOSING TOUCH WITH HIS TRADITIONS

Once he was a chairmaker.
People up north discovered him.
They said he was "an authentic mountain craftsman."
People came and made pictures of him working,
wrote him up in the newspapers.

He got famous.
Got a lot of orders for his chairs.

When he moved up to Cincinnati
so he could be closer to his market
(besides, a lot of his people lived there now)
he found out he was a Brier.

And when his customers found out
he was using an electric lathe and power drill
just to keep up with all the orders,
they said he was losing touch with his traditions.
His orders fell off something awful.
He figured it had been a bad mistake
to let the magazine people take those pictures
of him with his power tools, clean-shaven,
wearing a flowered sport shirt and drip-dry pants.

So he moved back down to east Kentucky.
Had himself a brochure printed up
with a picture of him using his hand lathe,
bearded, barefoot, in faded overalls.
Then when folks would come from the magazines,
he'd get rid of them before suppertime
so he could put on his shoes, his flowered sport shirt
and double-knit pants, and open a can of beer
and watch the six-thirty news on tv
out of New York and Washington.

He had to have some time to be himself.

SHAPES

When he saw people flowing out of the mountains,
leaving like a line of clanking coalcars,
his life grew damp and heavy in his flesh,
turned dark and cold
as charred wood in a rained-out fire.

The smallest thing, though, still could fire his spirit—
a chopping ax far off in the woods,
foxhounds running on the ridge at night,
the cries of children playing in the creek,
a dog lapping water in the dark.

When he found deer tracks on the logging roads
his life grew light and dry.
Near the weathered silver of old barns
his life caught fire
and he studied shapes in the flame of his own spirit.

ABANDONED

Sometimes his mind flew black as a crow
over hundreds of coves and hollers
fallen silent since the people were swept
out like rafted logs on spring's high water.

Then his life would stand
empty as an abandoned house
in one of those forgotten places,
his days like blackened chimneys
standing in fields going back
to thickets of second growth—
untended tombstones in a cemetery
up some lost valley.

Sometimes he thought there was nothing left
but the life of a half-wild dog
and the shelter of a junked car
turned on its back in a ditch, half
grown over with honeysuckle.

Or else his life became the house
seen once in a coalcamp in Tennessee:
the second story blown off in a storm
so stairs led up into the air
and stopped.

HOW AMERICA CAME TO THE MOUNTAINS

The way the Brier remembers it, folks weren't sure
at first what was coming. The air felt strange,
and smelled of blasting powder, carbide, diesel fumes.

A hen crowed and a witty prophecied
eight lanes of fogged-in asphalt filled with headlights.
Most people hadn't gone to bed that evening,
believing an awful storm was coming to the mountains.

And come it did. At first, the Brier remembers,
it sounded like a train whistle far off in the night.
They felt it shake the ground as it came roaring.
Then it was big trucks roaring down an interstate,
a singing like a circle saw in oak,
a roil of every kind of noise, factory
whistles, cows bellowing, a caravan
of camper trucks bearing down
blowing their horns and playing loud tapedecks.

He recollects it followed creeks and roadbeds
and when it hit, it blew the tops off houses,
shook people out of bed, exposing them
to a sudden black sky wide as eight lanes of asphalt,
and dropped a hail of beer cans, buckets
and bottles clattering on their sleepy heads.
Children were sucked up and never seen again.

The Brier remembers the sky full of trucks
and flying radios, bicycles and tv sets, whirling
log chains, red wagons, new shoes and tangerines.
Others told him they saw it coming like a wave
of tumbling dirt and rocks and carbodies
rolling before the blade of a bulldozer,
saw it pass on by, leaving a wake
of singing commercials, leaving ditches

full of spray cans and junk cars, canned
biscuit containers, tinfoil pie plates.
Some told him it fell like a flooding creek
that leaves ribbons of polyethylene
hanging from willow trees along the bank
and rusty cardoors half-silted over on sandbars.

It was that storm that dropped beat-up cars
all up and down the hollers, out in fields
just like a tornado that tears tin sheets
off tops of barns and drapes them like scarves
on trees in quiet fields two miles from any settlement.

And that's why now so many old barn doors
up and down the mountains hang by one hinge
and gravel in the creek is broken glass.

That's how the Brier remembers America coming
to the mountains. He was just a little feller
then but he recollects how his Mama got
all of the younguns out of bed, recalls
being scared of the dark and the coming roar
and trying to put both feet into one leg
of his overalls.
They left the mountains fast
and lived in Is, Illinois, for a while
but found it dull country and moved back.
The Brier has lived in As If, Kentucky, ever since.

HE WATCHES A TELEVISED SENATE HEARING

When he listened to the soft-handed
sons-of-bitches,
when he heard their words
moving fast like feet
trying hard not to
break into a run,
he saw little copperheads
pouring over each other
into the wideopen
mouth of their mother.

HE SINGS BALLADS

He guessed he knew a hundred of the old songs
his people sang when they came from across the waters:
The Knight in the Road, The Turkish Lady, and such like.

He couldn't recall a time when he didn't know them.
His grandfather sang them, and his father, too.
When the right mood took him, he sang them still.

And when he sang, the scholars gathered around.
They said he was a marvel, a great find.
It was hard to believe there was anyone like him left.

But when he'd leave the homeplace down in Madison,
and go up to Asheville and find work as a gardener
at some of the fine houses there, his neck turned red.

When he drank in the bars down on Lexington Avenue,
and sang the country songs right off the jukebox,
the big mirror running behind the bar

saw nothing but white trash.

And five hundred third-rate novels claimed him.

THE BRIER REVIEWING NOVELS

When he looked at his image in those novels
people packed with swimsuits and sun-tan lotion
so they could read of mountains at the beach,

he saw himself jerked along—moonshiner, feudist,
speaking Elizabethan English— through plots
that, like old newsreels hurrying people here
and there, made clowns of kings and dignitaries.

Yellow-paged thrillers. Comfortable people used to keep
them under their pillows with a neatly-folded nightshirt.
Drowsy episodes of wittys, mountain
maids, granny women.—And so to sleep.

BRIER SERMON—"You Must Be Born Again."

One Friday night the Brier felt called to preach. So Saturday morning, early, he appeared on a street corner in town and started preaching, walking up and down the sidewalk in front of a hardware and sporting goods store, back and forth in front of the shotguns and spin casting rods and Coleman camp stoves in the window, and looking across the street to the Greenstamp Redemption Store, where all the women brought their trading stamps. Cars and trucks were passing on the street, women were going in and out of the Redemption Store; and a few men and boys were standing around, in groups of three or four. The Brier knew they were listening even though they were not looking at him. He took as his text, "You Must Be Born Again", and started drawing the people closer, saying:

You may say, Preacher, where is your black Bible?
Why ain't you preachin down sin?
You may say, Preacher, why ain't you talkin about hell?
What about lipstick and short dresses?
What about cigarettes and whiskey?
What about dope and long hair?

Well, I didn't bring my Bible for a purpose.
Because this morning I wanted to say to you
I've been through all the books and come out yonside.
I'm educated, but not like the Brown boys.
Let me tell you about the Brown boys.

Feller over close to where I live
wanted some little cedar trees dug up
and planted in a row beside his house.
Tried to hire the Johnson boys, his neighbors,
but they were too scared to do it, didn't believe
in digging up cedar trees; they'd always heard
you'd die whenever the trees got tall enough
for their shadow to cover your grave. Get somebody else,
they said. Get old Jim Brown and Tom Brown.
They're educated, don't believe in nothin.

Well, I'm educated, but not like the Brown boys.
There's something I believe in:
You must be born again.

When he told about the Brown boys, the Brier heard some of the men laugh and say things to one another. Across the street at the Redemption Store a woman had come out and stopped, holding a little boy by the hand. The Brier figured the woman and the little boy would like a story, too.

You hear preachers talk about being lost.
What does it mean? What's it got to do
with being born again?—Feller I know,
he didn't go to church, but a church bus
always ran right by his house, and his boy,
about five or six years old, wanted to ride it.
So he let him go. Little boy got over there
in church and they were having a revival. Preacher
knelt down by the little boy, said, Son, are you lost?
Little boy said, Yes, for the bus had gone up several
creeks and hollers, picking up other people,
and carried the little boy so far from home
he didn't know where he was.

We're not so different from that little boy.
We can be lost, sitting right in the churchhouse.
Because we've been carried a long way around,
we've got so far away from home, we don't know where
we are, how we got where we are, how to get home again.
I know I wasn't so different from that little boy.

In my father's house, Jesus said.

Our foreparents left us a home here in the mountains.
But we try to live in somebody else's house.
We're ashamed to live in our father's house.
We think it's too old-fashioned.
Our foreparents left us a very fine inheritance,
but we don't believe it.
I just want to set you down, gather you together,
and read you the will!

You've wanted to run off and leave it, this inheritance.
You didn't want to see it,
ashamed to hear about it,
thought it wasn't pretty because it wasn't factory-made.
You put it back in the attic,
you've thrown it off in a corner of the barn,
thrown it down into a ditch.

In my father's house.

The house our foreparents left had a song, had a story.
We didn't care.
We said:
them old love songs
them old ballets
them old stories and like foolishness.

We were too busy anyway
giving our timber away
giving our coal away
to worry about love songs
to worry about ballets
to worry about old stories
and like foolishness.

But I know a man
he had a song from his foreparents.
It got carried off to New York City
and when he heard it played on tv one night
by three fellers who clowned and hip-swinged
he said he began to feel sick,
like he'd lost a loved one.
Tears came in his eyes
and he went out on the ridge and bawled
and said, "Lord, couldn't they leave me the good memories?"
Now that man wasn't lost
but he knew what he had lost.

You've done your best to disremember
what all you've lost.
You've spoiled the life that's yours
by right of inheritance.
You have to go around to the back door
of the life that belongs to somebody else.
You're neither here nor there.
You're out in the cold, buddy.

But you don't have to live in the past.
You can't, even if you try.
You don't have to talk old-fashioned,
dress old-fashioned.
You don't have to live the way your foreparents lived.
But if you don't know about them
if you don't love them
if you don't respect them
you're not going anywhere.
You don't have to think ridge-to-ridge,
the way they did.
You can think ocean-to-ocean.

You say, I'm not going to live in the past.
And all the time the past is living in you.
If you're lost, I say it's because
you're not living in your father's house.
It's the only house you've got
the only shelter you've got.
It may be just a mountain cabin,
but it's shelter and it's yours.

I left my father's house. Oh, I was moving.
But I noticed I wasn't getting anywhere.
I was living in somebody else's house.
I kept stepping out somebody else's door
and the roads I traveled kept winding, twisting,
had no beginning, had no end.

My own house, heired to me by my foreparents,
was right there all the time
yours is too
but I wasn't living in it. Well, I went home.
And when I stepped out of my own front door
when I knew where I was starting from
I knew then where I was going.
The only road I could go was the road
that started from my own front door.
—In my father's house, that's what the Bible says.

And it speaks of the sins of the fathers
sins of the fathers visited on the children
unto the fourth generation
says the sins of the fathers
will set the children's teeth on edge.
You were probably wondering why
I wasn't talking about sin. Well, I am.
But I say, Forget the sins of the fathers.
What about the sins of the sons and daughters?
We've got enough sins of our own to think about.
We're able to set our own teeth on edge.
Ours is the sin of forgetfulness
forgetfulness of the fathers
forgetfulness of a part of ourselves
makes us less than we ought to be
less than we could be.
Forgetfulness of the fathers makes us a people
who hardly cast a shadow against the ground.

You've heard it said you can't put new wine in old bottles.
Well, I don't know.
But don't be too sure you're new wine.
Maybe we're all old wine in new bottles.

The Brier was walking up and down the sidewalk, in front of the hardware and sporting goods store, passing back and forth in front of the guns and fishing rods and catalytic heaters, and

a good crowd was gathering across the street in front of the Redemption Store. He was pacing to the corner and back, stopping to lay a hand on a parking meter. Traffic was increasing in the street. Some of the people passing nodded or waved a hand, for they knew the Brier. He nodded, and waved back. When the light stopped traffic in the street, he stood on the balls of his feet and talked across the tops of cars to the crowd in front of the Redemption Store. The light would turn and the traffic would move on—cars and pickup trucks, motorcycles, RV's pulling boats. A boy parked his wide-tired jacked-up car at the first parking meter in front of the Brier, got out and went into the hardware store. The Brier moved down and talked across the car's hood.

I see these boys with their old cars jerked up
on a pulley out under a tree somewhere.
I see the cars looking like monster-beasts
that have these boys' heads bit off
and half of their bodies already eaten up.
I see them lying flat on their backs
with their heads up under cars,
nothing but their feet a-sticking out,
their hands mucking around in grease and gears.
And I think, buddy, that's how America's got you,
that's just the view you have of this country.
You've had your head eat off,
or else you're flat of your back
looking up into the guts and gears of America,
up to your elbows in her moving parts,
flat of your back, always looking up.

And I think to myself
I'd like to open up your heads
just like you raise the hood or go into a gearbox.
I'd like to re-wire your heads
and gap your spark plugs and re-set your timing.

Because you can get off your back
you can have a new view

you can get behind the wheel of America.
You can sit in the smooth upholstered seats of power
and listen to the music playing.

But first you've got to come home
and live in your father's house
and step out your own front door.
There's a road back, buddy.

Let me go back a little, let me tell you
how we got in this fix in the first place.
Our people settled in these mountains
and lived pretty much left to themselves.
When we got back in touch we started seeing
we had to catch up with the others.
And people came in telling us,
You've got to run, you've got to catch up.

Buddy, we've run so fast
we've run off and left ourselves.
We've run off and left the best part of ourselves.

And here's something peculiar:
running we met people on the road
coming from where we were headed,
wild-eyed people, running away from something.
We said, What'll you have? and it turned out
they were running away from what we were running after.
They were on their way to sit a spell with us.
We had something they wanted.
When they got here, a lot of us weren't to home.
We'd already run off and left ourselves.
So they set to picking up
all the things we'd already cast off—
our songs and stories, our whole way of life.
We couldn't see the treasures in our own house,
but they could, and they picked up what we'd abandoned.

You say, Preacher, you must be touched, that's foolishness.
How can anybody run off and leave himself?
I say, Don't ask me. You're the one who's done it.

You've kept the worst
and thrown away the best.
You've stayed the same where you ought to have changed,
changed where you ought to have stayed the same.
Wouldn't you like to know what to throw away
what to keep
what to be ashamed of
what to be proud of?
Wouldn't you like to know
how to change and stay the same?

You must be born again.

Say you were going on a trip
knowing you wouldn't ever be coming back
and all you'd ever have of that place you knew,
that place where you'd always lived
was what you could take with you.
You'd want to think what to take along
what would travel well
what you'd really need and wouldn't need.
I'm telling you, every day you're leaving
a place you won't be coming back to ever.
What are you going to leave behind?
What are you taking with you?
Don't run off and leave the best part of yourself.

And what is that best part? It's spirit.
I tell you, I know places in these mountains,
back off the big roads,
up the coves and hollers
old home places
with barns and apple orchards, cattle gaps,
haunted by spirits

spirits of people who left there
taking everything with them but their spirits
for their spirits wouldn't leave that place
and their spirits are there yet
like half-wild dogs or cats that will live on
around a place after the people are gone.

And I know other places
in our towns and cities
where the people have moved to without their spirits.
Do you believe in signs? I do.
I believe in signs.
And when I see people living in dirt
living in filth and trash
I believe it's a sign.
It believe it's a sign the spirits of those people
are living somewhere else.
For a spirit won't live in filth and nastiness.
A spirit keeps its own place clean
like around a fox's den
when the little foxes come out and play in the evening
and it's clean around the den.

Yes, foxes have their dens
but what do we have?

We've lost the ground from underneath our feet,
lost the spiritual ground.
We've run off and left the best part of ourselves.

We've moved to the cities
moved to town
and left our spirits in the mountains
to live like half-wild dogs around the homeplace.

You say, Preacher, we have to change.
That's right.
But we're forgetful.

It's our forgetfulness that's a sin against ourselves.
We don't know any more about our history
than a dog knows about his daddy.
We're ignorant of ourselves
confused in what little we do know.
All we know is what other folks have told us.
They've said, You're fine Anglo-Saxons,
pioneer stock.
Then we went to the cities.
They said we were trash, said we were Briers.
They said, You're proud and independent.
They said, You're narrow-minded.
They said, You're right from the heart of America.
They said, You're the worst part of America.
They said, We ought to be more like you.
They said, You ought to be more like us.

You've heard that prayer that goes:
Help us to see ourselves as others see us.
Buddy, that's not a prayer we want to pray.
I believe we ought to pray:
Lord, help us to see ourselves—and no more.
Or maybe: Help us to see ourselves,
help us to be ourselves,
help us to free ourselves
from seeing ourselves
as others see us.

I know it's hard
to turn loose of that old self,
that confused self.

You think, That's the only thing I am,
what someone else has told me I am.
I've hung there, I know.
I've twisted in that wind.
But you can turn loose, you can do it.

One dark night in the fall of the year
a man went out to coonhunt—went by himself.
His dogs they struck a trail and he followed
up the ridge, stopping to listen, moving on,
moving through the dark.
And when his dogs barked treed, way over yonder,
he hurried on through the brush, moving faster,
and walked, yes, walked right over a cliff.
You'll do that in these mountains if you're not careful.
Well, he managed to grab a hold as he went over.
A little twisty, runty tree was growing out,
out from a crack in the cliff, and he hung by it,
held on in the dark.
But he couldn't do anything but just hang there.
He couldn't get back up, there was no footing.
And nothing but death and darkness there below him.
But he couldn't hold on much longer, either.
Finally all the strength in his hands was gone.
He couldn't hold on any longer, and he fell—
about a foot. Yes, fell about a foot.
He'd hung as long as he could, He'd held to dear life,
just as anybody will.
Having no choice, he turned loose of his life.
But he didn't lose it.
He didn't lose himself, he found himself,
found himself on firm ground. And he went home.
But he went home a changed man.

You're hanging like that man.
You're struggling for a toehold in the dark.
You're holding on to that old self
but your grip is growing weaker all the time.
Turn loose.
All you'll do is fall about a foot.
You'll fall about a foot to spiritual ground.
You'll fall home.
You'll walk away a different man or woman.

Oh, you'll think, I'm going to die.
But you won't die.
I'm not talking about physical death.
When you die a physical death
you're put into the ground.
And the Bible teaches you'll be raised up,
resurrected from that physical death.
But I'm not talking about physical death.
I'm talking about spiritual death.
I'm not talking about life after death.
I'm talking about life before death.
I'm saying if you're dead in life,
spiritually dead in life,
you must be born again,
you must be born again and again and again.

You say, Preacher, what's it like? I'm here to tell you:
It's like becoming a little child again
but being grown up too.
It's the best of both.
It's being at home everywhere.
It's living in your own house.
It's stepping out your own front door every morning.
It's being old wine in a new bottle.

It's getting to know another side of yourself.
You know how sometimes when you squirrel hunt
a squirrel will get on the back side of a tree
and if you step around there, he just goes
around to the side of the tree where you were standing,
and if you step back around to that side again,
he goes to the side where he was in the first place
and on and on and you never get him that way.
You've got a side of yourself that's like that squirrel,
always out of sight.

What's it like—being born again?
It's going back to what you were before
without losing what you've since become.

They say people can go blind gradually.
They say people can go deaf gradually.
Lose the sense of taste little by little.
They forget the shapes of leaves on trees,
forget the sound of the creek running,
the world just blurs, grows silent.
They forget the taste of coffee and all their food.
Now what would it be like if that sight were given back?
If they heard the creek running again, or a crow call?
If suddenly they could taste their food again?
Something is restored to them, a richness.
They've found something they didn't even know they'd lost.
They're born again to sights and sounds and tastes.

Oh, you must be born again.

Do you remember, back when you were little,
and wore brogans or heavy shoes all winter?
And do you remember that first day in spring
when you took them off and started going barefoot?
The air was warm but the ground was still so cool,
your feet were white and tender
but you felt light-footed
you had good wind
and you felt like you could fly right off the earth.

You must be born again!

The crowd had scattered now. The street was almost empty when he finished. He stood a moment like a blind man smiling and gazing past people he spoke to. Then he reached out, as if to gather something in and, raising his hand higher still, he blessed an invisible crowd on the sidewalk. Traffic stopped at the light, and the Brier on the corner disappeared behind a motor home. When it pulled away, he had gone.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JIM WAYNE MILLER (1936-1996) was born in Leicester, North Carolina. He received his B.A. from Berea College in 1958 and his Ph.D. in German Literature from Vanderbilt University in 1965. He was a professor of German language and literature at Western Kentucky University and a major influence on literature and poetry in the Appalachian region.

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